

North Korea and Nuclear Weapons - Background Reading

What is North Korea like today?

North Korea today is one of the most impoverished, isolated societies on earth. Some estimate that as many as two million North Koreans starved to death between 1995 and 1998 after a series of floods. Estimates are that out of a population of twenty-two million, thirteen million North Koreans are suffering from malnutrition. Sixty percent of all North Korean children are malnourished—the highest level in the world. Nevertheless, North Korea has one million soldiers in its military, many of whom are poised along the border with South Korea. North Korea is one of the most highly militarized countries in the world. In 2001, North Korea spent more than 30 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on the military. Nearly eight thousand North Korean artillery pieces are along the border, many within range of the South Korean capital of Seoul.

North Koreans are isolated from the rest of the world by an extremely repressive state. For example, when the United States provided 500,000 tons of food aid in 2001, the North Korean government told its people that the food was provided as a form of tribute to their powerful country. North Koreans are forbidden to have any contact with the world outside of North Korea by mail, telephone, internet, or radio. Today, North Korea seems incomprehensible to most Americans.

Why is this communist totalitarian state threatening us? What is the history of relations between our countries? The story of our relations with North Korea begins at end of the Second World War.

Why was Korea divided in two?

In 1910, Japan annexed and occupied Korea. At the end of World War II, the Japanese forces in Korea surrendered to the Americans in the South and to the Soviets in the North. A line of demarcation between the two regions was created by the superpowers. This line divided the country in two—a communist North and a capitalist South.

As tensions between the Soviets and the United States heated up and the Cold War began, the division of North Korea became an issue for national security. The United States installed a hard-line anti-communist regime in the South. In the North, the Soviets installed Kim Il Sung, a staunch communist who had lived in the Soviet Union during World War II.

How did the Korean War begin?

Kim Il Sung hoped to reunify the two Koreas by conquering the South, and he sought permission to invade from the Soviet leader Josef Stalin. Stalin agreed, and on June 25, 1950, the North launched an invasion backed by Soviet equipment and military advisors. The North Koreans captured Seoul in three days.

Why did the United States intervene in Korea?

For the United States these developments were a cause for great alarm. China had become a communist state and tensions with the Soviets in Europe were extremely high. President Truman believed the communist aggression needed to be checked wherever it occurred in the world. The United States and a coalition of nations under the auspices of the United Nations landed troops in South Korea, retook Seoul, and forced North Korean troops to retreat. Some UN troops reached the border of communist China. This advance triggered an attack by the Chinese, who said they would not allow North Korea to fall.

The Korean War lasted for another three years. Thirty-four thousand Americans died. More than three million Koreans were killed or wounded, and there were nine hundred thousand Chinese casualties. Although a truce was signed, no formal peace treaty was signed. The border between North and South Korea remained.

What was the outcome of the Korean War?

The 1953 truce agreement established a three-mile-wide demilitarized zone (DMZ). In fact, the border between the Koreas became a highly militarized area where each side faced the other down on a daily basis. Over the years, small scale fighting resulted in the deaths of over one thousand Koreans and forty-nine Americans. There were numerous efforts at infiltration, espionage, and provocation. The North Korean capture in 1968 of an intelligence-gathering ship, the U.S.S. Pueblo, and the murder of two American soldiers in 1976 as they attempted to cut down a tree in the DMZ heightened tensions nearly to the point of war.

How did the end of the Soviet Union affect North Korea?

The end of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of an era. For the United States, it meant the end of more than four decades of nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union. For North Korea, it meant that aid and support from the Soviet Union ceased. Starvation and hardship followed. North Korea sought to improve relations with the United States but was met with a cold shoulder due its repressive policies, its sponsorship of terrorism, and its radical ideology.

How did the United States and its allies respond to the North Korean nuclear program in the 1990s?

In the early 1990s, North Korea devoted increased resources to a nuclear weapons program. In 1993, they threatened to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), a treaty in which countries that do not have nuclear weapons agree not to acquire them. The United States began negotiations with North Korea in the hope of heading off the proliferation of nuclear weapons by a country we considered dangerous. After difficult negotiations, in 1994 (in what became known as the “Agreed Framework”) the North Koreans agreed to shut down their missile development program and suspend construction of their graphite-moderated reactors that could produce weapons grade plutonium as a byproduct. In exchange, the United States made a commitment to take the lead in construction by 2003 of a light water reactor that would meet North Korea’s energy needs (without producing weapons grade plutonium), and to provide energy and other forms of economic aid in the interim. Under the agreement North Korea could continue to produce nuclear energy in light water plants monitored by the IAEA. In addition, the United States agreed to begin to move towards normalization of political and economic relations between the two countries.

The 1994 Agreed Framework did not last. In 1999, the United States announced that the light water reactors would not be completed in 2003 as promised, but would be delayed until 2007 or 2008. North Korea threatened to resume its nuclear program if the 1994 agreement was not fulfilled. President Clinton later discussed a possible deal for assisting in the development of space launchers designed for commercial use only in exchange for further constraints on North Korea’s missile program. When the Bush administration took office in 2001, discussions of a new missile agreement ended. North Korea imposed a unilateral moratorium on missile tests until 2003, but said it would not extend that unless a new agreement on missiles had been reached with the United States.

What did President Bush say about North Korea in his 2002 State of the Union Address?

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 changed the security climate in Washington. Prior to September 11, President Bush had been less inclined to negotiate with North Korea than the Clinton administration had been. Following September 11, President Bush began to confront regimes he considered “evil” and a threat to U.S. security. North Korea fell into this category. In his State of the Union speech in January 2002, President George W. Bush condemned North Korea as part of an “axis of evil” (which included Iran and Iraq as well.) President Bush criticized the North Korean

government for starving its citizens while threatening the world with missiles and weapons of mass destruction. He warned that he would not allow North Korea to threaten the United States. He cancelled work on the light water reactors and suspended energy assistance. Tensions between the two countries heated up once again.

What is the U.S. presence in South Korea now?

The United States maintains thirty-seven thousand troops in South Korea at a cost of one hundred million dollars per year. The troops are there to demonstrate a U.S. commitment to South Korean security. Many South Koreans have come to see U.S. policy as an obstacle to better relations with North Korea and many resent the presence of U.S. forces in their country.

How did U.S. relations with North Korea change in 2002?

In the fall of 2002, North Korea stunned U.S. officials when they admitted that they had been continuing work on nuclear weapons program for years, in violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework. North Korea expelled weapons monitors from the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA), announced that they were beginning production of nuclear materials, and declared that they were withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Experts announced that, within a few months, North Korea would be able to produce one or two nuclear weapons per month. There was a concern that North Korea would sell its weapons to other states or to terrorists. North Korea demanded direct negotiations with the United States, but refused to sit down to talks until the United States proclaimed that it would not engage in military action.

How has the international community dealt with North Korea's 2002 confession?

Since December of 2002, six countries (United States, Russia, China, South Korea, North Korea and Japan) have been participating in U.S. sponsored talks designed to end North Korea's nuclear program. The most recent in this series of talks was held in June 2004, in Beijing, China. Though representatives at the talks called them "productive," no agreement was reached. North Korea did not respond to proposals for further talks, and experts speculated that North Korea had made progress towards enhancing their nuclear capabilities instead.

How has the Bush administration outlined U.S. policy towards North Korea for its second term?

President Bush did not repeat his accusation of North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" in either his second inaugural address or his 2005 State of the Union address. Instead, his speeches outlined a broad foreign policy centered on spreading freedom and ending tyranny. Responding to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's categorization of North Korea as one of six "outposts of tyranny" in the world, North Korea declared, "There is no justification for us to participate in the six-party talks again."

What are the immediate causes of current concern about North Korea?

In February 2005, North Korea declared that it has nuclear weapons, and that it will no longer participate in the six-party talks that were designed to end North Korea's nuclear program. The announcement marked North Korea's first public declaration that it possesses nuclear weapons and came only days after countries involved in negotiations with North Korea (Russia, China, Japan, South Korea, and the U.S.) announced their prediction that North Korea would soon return to the nuclear talks. In October 2006, North Korea announced that it had exploded a nuclear warhead. If this claim proves true, the ambiguity about the status of North Korea's nuclear program is over; they have nuclear weapons and want the world to know it.

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Mapping the Nuclear World (additional free online lesson plan)

Online Ballot: Nuclear Weapons Policy

Link to Arms Control Association — complete text of the 1994 Agreed Framework

Link to BBC News Online — *Q&A: North Korea’s Nuclear Threat*

Link to NewsHour with Jim Lehrer (PBS) — *North Korea: Nuclear Standoff*

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